

Home About Us Church Growth Directory Leadership Ministry New Church News TAP Donate



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News

[Breaking News](#)

[Feature Focus](#)

[Celebrate](#)

[Conference News](#)

[Local Church News](#)

[Lifting Up...](#)

[NEWS Archives](#)

[Upcoming Events](#)

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[What Ministries are Available?](#)

[Is Training Available?](#)

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A Word From Tim Downs - March



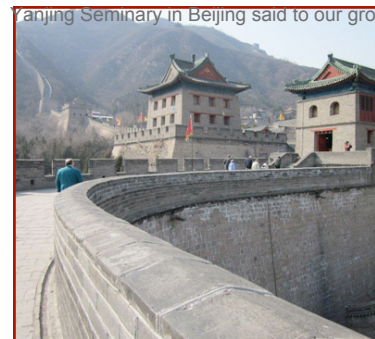
Dear Friends,

Our Partners in China

I have just returned from a two week trip from China, sponsored by Wider Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ. This trip was one of several to different points on the globe to celebrate 200 years of mission by the United Church of Christ and our predecessor denominations. The purpose of this trip was to see the work that we, the United Church of Christ, do with our partner churches in China. Before I begin, I would say that one of the dangers of travel is that it transforms those who do it into "instant experts". I do not pretend to be an expert on China, but I do not hesitate to share some initial impressions of a dynamic nation, and a church adapting creatively to the challenges of ministry in the midst of tremendous social, cultural, and political change.

First a word about China: It is a nation with a rich and deep history extending back over 2000 years. At the same time, my first impressions were of a young nation running to catch up. The cities are modern, the buildings tall, the streets clean, the airports and train stations modern and efficient. The highways and roads meet or exceed the highest standards of modern roadways anywhere. Many people in the cities are well dressed, and in spite of the clear discrepancy between the wealth of the cities and the poverty of the countryside, there is clearly an effort to extend development into rural areas by building roads, small factories and housing. I could not look at the Great Wall or the Forbidden City without being awed by all that proceeded modern day China.

In this context of tremendous change, our partner churches in China are growing rapidly. There are an estimated 23 million Christians in China. The President of



Yanqing Seminary in Beijing said to our group, "the church in China is in a Pentecost season". I thought to myself that this season has all of the excitement that I find in reading about the Second Great Awakening of the church in the United States at the beginning of the 19th century. For us, that was the season in which our forebearers discovered the voice of the gospel speaking to social issues and a time of great vitality and growth for the church.

Our partners in China are members of the China Christian Council. Our work with them has involved active support of theological education through the 21 seminaries in China, providing books, scholarships, faculty members, and exchange programs.



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UCC Newsroom

Headlines from the United Church of Christ

New report examines impact of recession on congregational vitality

The 2008 recession extended a decade-long erosion of the financial health of American congregations, with just 14 percent of the 11,077 randomly sampled congregations saying in 2010 that their financial health is excellent.



faculty members, and exchange programs for clergy to have additional education in the United States. We have also been engaged in work with people who are HIV-AIDS positive, and have been ostracized by society, education for children, disaster relief, and projects addressing agricultural development and vocational training, economic empowerment of the poor, and much more. I was moved at the impact that the United Church of Christ has had in parts of China where others will not go.



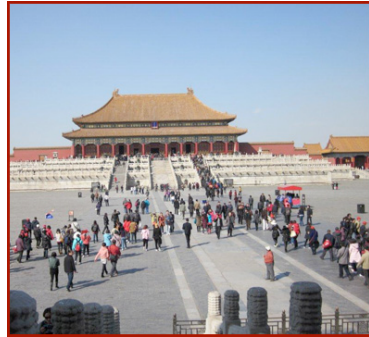
The leadership needs of the church in China are profound. Time and again we were told of a pastor serving between 5,000 to up to 20,000 members. There is a network of training to equip ordained elders and lay workers to assist pastors, but the seminaries cannot provide enough training for the leadership needs of a church that has grown so rapidly in the last two decades.



The mission of the United Church of Christ in China began in 1830 when the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign

Mission sent their first missionary to China, Elijah Bridgeman. Between then and the end of WW II, missions built schools, universities, hospitals, and were the first to introduce modern education and medicine to China. Today many of those schools and hospitals are the finest in China. The Chinese church credits Congregational missionaries for first articulating the principles of the Three Self Patriotic Movement, which are foundational to the work of the church today. The principles are that the church is to be "self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting". These principles are ones of a church which has matured beyond its origins as a mission church, and found its own voice.

The church in China today is articulating its own theological foundations as well. In a meeting with the faculty of the Yanjing Theological Seminary, Dr. Chen Xun articulated a "Chopstick Theology" which begins with the life and teachings of Jesus. It is based



on a premise of collaboration and harmony to accomplish the ends of the church.

Three core characteristics of Chopstick Theology are; harmony, reconciliation, and the development of a community of faith to benefit modern China. The church is also committed to promoting interfaith understanding. The Chinese church understands itself as a post-denominational church, and one that is seeking to be grounded in sound theological teaching.

Often mission and social transformation are

understood as ways in which to build trust in a society that is decidedly secular and philosophical as opposed to religious. I was interested to hear that in the earthquake in 2008, the Red Cross reported that fully 80% of their volunteers were Christian. This is remarkable in a society that is about 2% Christian, and speaks to the impact of the Christian church.

I was moved by the challenges of the church in China, and inspired by the ways in which it is meeting them. We in the United Church of Christ have been a part of setting a foundation in place for a church that has found its own voice, is growing at a pace unimaginable to their missionary founders, and I believe that we have come to a time when the church we were a part of shaping at its beginnings, might become a church that inspires our renewal in the 21st century.

Peace,

Tim Downs

Timothy C. Downs

Conference Minister

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EVENTS CALENDAR

« < April 2011 > »						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

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